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EDUCATION ON THE U.S. CONSTITUTION

ERIC Digest No. 39

by

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ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest examines (1) treatment of the U.S. Constitution in the curriculum of secondary schools, (2) public opinion and knowledge about the Constitution, and (3) guidelines for improvement of education on the Constitution. Although included in nearly every secondary school curriculum, education on the U.S. Constitution has suffered from neglect and routine treatment. The educational agenda is cluttered, and priorities are often unclear. Instructional goals about the Constitution may be viewed as no more important than other goals in the vast array of competing purposes of education in social studies. Studies of standard secondary school textbooks have revealed restricted coverage and shallow treatment of basic principles, values, and issues of constitutional government. Studies have found that the U.S. public appears to be deficient in both knowledge and appreciation of fundamental values, principles, and issues of their constitutional government. Some of the suggestions for improving education on the Constitution are: (1) assigning a high priority to educational goals of the Constitution; (2) blending social history with political history; (3) emphasizing the applicability of the Constitution to the common concern of citizens; and (4) obtaining high quality learning materials on the Constitution to complement the standard textbook. A list of resources and references are included in the digest. (SM)

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Education on the U.S. Constitution

by John J. Patrick

The United States of America, a comparatively young country, has the world's oldest written constitution. In 1787, this Constitution was a striking innovation, a breakthrough in the establishment of republican self-government. Since 1787, this Constitution has been the pre-eminent symbol of American nationhood and a practical instrument of free government (popular government limited by law to protect the liberty and security of individuals). Furthermore, this Constitution has had an enormous influence on governments around the world. According to Albert Blaustein, a specialist in the comparative study of constitutions, "The United States Constitution is this nation's most important export" (1984, 14).

The bicentennial of the Constitution provides a special opportunity for renewal and improvement of education on basic values and principles of American constitutional government, which are essential elements of national unity and cohesion in a pluralistic society. These ideas are relevant and valuable to all Americans, regardless of social differences, and must be understood and used by all who would exercise fully their rights and responsibilities of citizenship. What is the status of education on the Constitution in American secondary schools? This ERIC Digest examines (1) treatment of the Constitution in the curriculum of secondary schools, (2) public opinion and knowledge about the Constitution, and (3) guidelines for improvement of education on the Constitution.

How Is the Constitution Treated in the Curriculum of Secondary Schools? State government mandates, public expectations, and educational traditions indicate the secure place of constitutional studies in the curriculum. Throughout the United States, students study the Constitution through required courses in American history, government, and civics. Most Americans are exposed to formal education on the Constitution at least three times in secondary school—(1) in a junior high/middle school American history course, (2) in a high school American history course, and (3) in a high school American government or civics course.

Although established in the secondary school curriculum, education on the Constitution has suffered from neglect and routine treatment. Assessments of curriculum guides indicate lengthy lists of concepts and topics about American constitutional government. However, there also are long lists of other goals pertaining to a broad range of concerns from environmental issues and global perspectives to social change and futuristic studies. The educational agenda is cluttered, and priorities often are unclear. In many schools, goals on the Constitution may be viewed as no more important than a vast array of competing purposes of education in the social studies.

Studies of standard secondary school textbooks have revealed restricted coverage and shallow treatment of basic principles, values, and issues of constitutional government. During the 1960s and 1970s, coverage of social history expanded at the expense of political history (including constitutional history).

It seems that study of the Constitution has all too often been overshadowed by trendy topics and curriculum fads. There is an underemphasis on the Constitution relative to other topics of lesser importance in citizenship education. In a recent study of the Constitution in American culture, historian Michael Kammen concludes: "The Constitution is too often neglected or poorly taught in American schools" (1986, 24).

What do Assessments of the Public's Knowledge and Attitudes Reveal About the Consequences of Neglecting Education on the Constitution? Various studies over the years have indicated that Americans tend to have great pride in their Constitution, but this veneration is not coupled with ample knowledge and deep understanding. Too many Americans are insufficiently educated about their Constitution.

A recent nation-wide survey found that many Americans appear to be deficient in both knowledge and appreciation of fundamental values, principles, and issues of their constitutional government (Hearst Report 1987). For example, about half of the respondents believed that the President can suspend the Constitution in the event of war or national emergency. Sixty percent said that the President, acting alone, can appoint a member of the Supreme Court. Fifty-seven percent thought that local schools can require children to pledge allegiance to the flag. Only 50% knew that a Supreme Court decision can be overruled. Nearly half revealed ignorance of both American government and the ideas of Karl Marx when they said that the following statement is part of the Constitution: "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs."

Various studies of American youth during the past thirty years corroborate the conclusions of the recent Hearst survey (NAEP 1983; Patrick et al. 1986). In addition, they have revealed that many students have a flawed understanding and appreciation of certain core values of free government, such as guaranteeing freedom of expression and political participation under law to all—even to very unpopular or despised individuals or groups (Elam 1984). Furthermore, Americans tend to be insufficiently informed about perennial issues generated by paradoxes of their Constitution—how to have a powerful government that is also strictly limited by law; how to have government by the people that also prohibits majorities from oppressing individuals or minorities; how to have both separation and sharing of powers among three

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branches of government; how to have a supreme national government without violating certain rights and powers reserved to the state governments; how to maintain national security while also protecting certain rights of individuals, including dissenters.

How Can Education on the Constitution Be Improved? Assessments of the secondary school curriculum and the public's knowledge and attitudes suggest the need to renew and improve education on the Constitution. Use the following guidelines to meet this need.

- Assign high priority to goals of education on the Constitution.
- Expand coverage of the Constitution in standard courses such as American history, government, and civics.
- Blend social history with political history—including constitutional history—so that there is a balance between these two domains of content in standard American history courses.
- Emphasize the applicability of the Constitution to the common concerns of citizens—the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.
- Integrate knowledge of principles and values of the Constitution with facts about the structure and operations of government in the past and present; students need to know both major concepts and information that pertains to these ideas.
- Examine major issues of the past and present that are associated with paradoxes of American constitutional government, such as majority rule with protection of minority rights.
- Obtain high quality learning materials on the Constitution that can be used readily to complement standard textbooks.

By using guidelines in the preceding list, we Americans may revitalize and enhance education on the Constitution during the bicentennial period and beyond it. By so doing, we may sustain the values and institutions of free government.

References and ERIC Resources

Following is a list of resources, including references used to prepare this Digest. Those items followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system and are available in microfiche and or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, write EDRS, 3900 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, Virginia 22304. Entries followed by an EJ number are annotated monthly in CIJE *(Current Index to Journals in Education)* which is available in libraries containing ERIC collections. EJ documents are not available through EDRS; however, they can be located in the journal section of most libraries, using the bibliographic information provided below.

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